

# Reaching Backyards and Board Rooms:

## Strategies for Circulation that ‘Change the Conversation’

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*Through a case study of a community organization, The Women’s Fund of the Greater Cincinnati Foundation, I present a new framework for circulation strategies. The organization composed and distributed research reports on the gendered inequalities in their local economy, which they aimed to circulate locally. However, they encountered local publics that often resisted discourse on gender and gender-related issues. So, the organization developed a strategy focused not on circulating their work, but on challenging the discursive norms of their local publics that structured circulation and engendered the resistance. My case study reveals new ways to research and strategize circulation—aiming not to circulate texts or disrupt ongoing circulation but to challenge and/or make anew the norms that structure circulation.*

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Over the past two decades, community literacy and public rhetoric scholars have studied strategies for generating circulation. Motivating this work has been the theory that circulation, which Laurie E. Gries (2015) in *Still Life with Rhetoric* defined as “the spatio-temporal

flows of discourse” (8), plays a central role in contemporary public discourse, shaping public knowledges and rhetorics (Edbauer 2005; Trimbur 2000; Warner 2002). Thus, activists and community organizations require approaches to generating circulation to amplify their public engagement efforts (Mathieu et al 2012; Mahoney 2010; Welch 2005). Yet, as others have noted, actually generating circulation requires substantial time, effort, and resources, which are often beyond the means of many individuals and organizations (Ridolfo 2012; Rousculp 2012).

So, scholars have researched practitioners and the circulation strategies they have deployed in spite of their limited means. Several scholars have examined practitioners’ composing and distributing processes, re-articulating them so that others can apply them to their own public work (Dadas and Jory 2015; Jenkins et al 2013; Ryder 2010). Others have outlined the ways practitioners have built personal networks through which texts can be circulated and individuals supported to distribute their work (Anderson 2010; Mathieu 2012; Mathieu and George 2009). This research has provided invaluable, and affordable visions of and approaches to circulation, yet much of it overemphasizes *practitioners* and/or *their texts*. By concentrating on practitioners and texts, these strategies neglect the role of publics in regulating circulation, for publics develop and sustain themselves through material and discursive infrastructures that, among other things, regulate the ways texts get taken-up and circulated within them (Trimbur 2000; Welch 2005; Wells 1996).

Personally, I recognized the narrowness of much of the existing scholarship on circulation strategies during my research project with a nonprofit community organization called The Women’s Fund of The Greater Cincinnati Foundation (TWF). TWF, in their own words on their website, works to ensure “the economic self-sufficiency of women in our region and ignite[s] a shared desire to improve it.” They produce research reports on the structural social and economic challenges women face; they make grants to raise the public profile of programs aiding women; and they hold public events that broadcast the ways women have engaged systemic challenges. Alongside these efforts, TWF adopted an organizational mission: “Our goal at The Women’s Fund of the Greater Cincinnati Foundation is for women’s

[socioeconomic issues] to be discussed in backyards and board rooms—casually among friends and at the highest levels of influence in our community” (The Women’s Fund of The Greater Cincinnati 2015). They not only perform the aforementioned public work; they also recognize the need for getting their work to circulate into local public spaces.

Yet TWF had to make their efforts to circulate their work into backyards and board rooms an explicit mission because they had come to realize that their local public discourses for social and economic issues were rigid, narrow, and restricted. Despite early circulation strategies, press releases, large print runs and distributions of research reports, presentations, and public events, TWF’s work struggled to generate uptake and circulation. Worse, in many instances, individuals *resisted* their work. As Vanessa Freytag, TWF’s executive director, recounted her numerous presentations of TWF’s research to businesses, politicians, and community leaders, she described a common resistant refrain:

I couldn’t count the number of conversations that I had with people that would say [in response to TWF’s research and discourse focus on gender], “We serve all.” And I would say, “But, that’s not adequate because women have more and different challenges than men”. All I’m saying is pull it apart and see what the differences are so we can best serve both populations.’ And for years there was almost no positive reaction. People would say, “We are doing what we do, because we serve everybody.” It was always, “everybody, everybody, everybody.”

There seemed to be little space for acknowledging, let alone circulating, TWF’s gender-focused research and messages. So, TWF adopted an organizational mission to develop ways to get their work, and other work on women’s socioeconomic issues, into local public spaces.

Out of their “reaching backyards and board rooms” mission, TWF developed a noteworthy circulation strategy. The strategy, titled “#Smarticles,” involved the weekly posting of articles on social and/or economic issues alongside commentary that connected the articles

to local issues and/or TWF's research to TWF's official Facebook page. More generally, the strategy focused not on generating circulation for TWF's texts and instead attempted to establish alternative possibilities for their other work to circulate into local public spaces. To do so, the strategy contested the discursive structures of their local publics, which TWF realized engendered much of the resistance their work received. #Smarticles demonstrated that there are elements beyond texts and individuals with which circulation strategies must engage if we hope to generate circulation for activist and public texts.

Thus, I have studied TWF's #Smarticle strategy in an effort to expand the ways we research and enact circulation strategies, particularly the ways we situate publics within strategies. Through the example of #Smarticles, we can define publics as idiosyncratic discursive spaces with distinct discursive and material infrastructures that regulate circulation. Furthermore, my case study of #Smarticles establishes ways to make those infrastructures central to a circulation strategy. Specifically, the case study reveals the need for practitioners to study the infrastructures of their local publics, mapping the ways they constrain circulation, and then use that knowledge to develop strategies for contesting those infrastructures and thus engender new possibilities for circulation. #Smarticles suggests expanding our strategies to situate our local publics as discursive spaces formed by particular social and material infrastructures, and from there, practitioners must observe and then engage those infrastructures if they hope to generate circulation for their information and/or messages.

Additionally, the specific tactics of #Smarticles suggest new approaches to circulation strategies for practitioners. First, practitioners should observe and then define the norms in their local public, identifying specific, social characteristics to situate their work within and to contest. Second, practitioners do not have to create their own texts, they can also can compile, connect, and consistently recirculate others' texts (Olson 2009; Ridolfo and DeVoss 2009). As TWF did, recirculation can be performed to establish alternative public values and discourses. Third, practitioners can center their strategies not on quantitative outcomes, like retweets, donations, and copies distributed, but on the equipping of strangers to circulate

texts, which the strangers might have otherwise been inclined to resist. Fourth, practitioners should approach their strategies not as singular, established plans but rather as emergent processes that require the involvement of and interactions between multiple individuals. Lastly, TWF's strategy demonstrates that contesting local publics entails reshaping how individuals outside of one's own networks engage with texts and by extension, one another.

Below, I have presented a case study of TWF's #Smarticles. In order to properly frame the case study, I have provided a definition of a central concept for TWF's strategy, public "norms." To define the concept, I have drawn upon recent circulation studies scholarship on publics and how social and material forces regulate circulation within and between them. Following the definition, I present my case study, which I have divided into three sections, each focusing on one of the proposed approaches toward circulation strategies: acknowledging and engaging public norms, working with others and others' texts, and valuing network-building and qualitative outcomes. Lastly, I have outlined the implications of TWF's #Smarticles for future research on and approaches to circulation strategies.

## **PRACTITIONERS' STORIES: CASE STUDIES OF CIRCULATION STRATEGIES**

To study TWF's #Smarticle strategy, I used Jim Ridolfo's (2012) case study method, "practitioners' stories," outlined in his article "Rhetorical Delivery as Strategy." Unlike other methods for studying circulation, the practitioners' stories method focuses on the practitioner and her goals, perceptions, and plans for her texts and their potential circulation. The method offers insights into *practitioners'* visions and plans for circulation. The method provides a means for researchers to identify, study, and make knowledge out of practitioners' strategies for the delivery and distribution of their texts. To accomplish such a study, researchers interview practitioners about their strategies and then coordinate data from the interviews with rhetorical analysis of the distributed texts. Coordinating these two data sets enables researchers to study practitioners' understanding of circulation, their perceptions of how circulation manifests in their local publics, and how those understandings shape the composing and distribution of texts.

To enact this method, I interviewed the three TWF members who implemented the #Smarticle strategy: Vanessa Freytag, TWF's executive director; Meghan Cummings, TWF's director of development; and Sally Neidhard, TWF's volunteer chair of their engagement committee. Freytag developed and directed the strategy. Cummings participated in the strategy, collecting and posting articles. Neidhard wrote and posted a majority of the #Smarticle posts. I interviewed them about the #Smarticle strategy and their perceptions of and plans for the circulation of the posts.

I coordinated my interview data with rhetorical analysis of the #Smarticle posts as well as a few internal documents that were part of the development and management of the strategy. To study the #Smarticles, I screen-captured and saved copies of all forty-seven posts. I also screen-captured and saved copies of the two internal documents that were part of the strategy: a shared Google Doc used to store links to articles to be posted later and an organizational schedule that listed the days for posting #Smarticles. I analyzed these texts for how they manifested Freytag's, Cummings's, or Neidhard's perceptions of and/or goals for circulation. Additionally, I analyzed the posts for the ways in which they negotiated or engaged TWF's perceptions of the norms and discursive structures within the Greater Cincinnati area. Lastly, I analyzed the texts for the ways they performed circulation practices or at least demonstrated circulation practices.

In total, I coordinated data from three interviews with TWF's writers about their circulation strategies for #Smarticle posts with an analysis of the forty-seven #Smarticle posts. Based upon the interview responses and the various rhetorical moves present in the posts, my case study focused on TWF's efforts to engage the discursive structures of the local publics, specifically the public norms that regulate circulation.

Before I present my case study of TWF's #Smarticle strategy, though, I pause to define the term that I am using to explain the conditioned responses TWF experienced in reaction to their texts. The scholarship on circulation offers several terms for naming and understanding these conditioned responses. As outlined below, I use a term to encompass all of them, for I require a term that enables me

to grapple with the numerous literacies, knowledges, and emotions that influenced how individuals responded to TWF's work. Thus, I use the term "norms" to cover these various discursive structures shaping circulation within publics.

## **PUBLIC NORMS: ON THE MECHANISMS THAT REGULATE CIRCULATION WITHIN PUBLICS**

Several scholars have theorized how publics develop through the circulation of texts and the norms of interaction that arise to maintain ongoing circulation and subsequent concertation of related texts (Chaput 2010; Deem 2002; Edbauer 2005; Warner 2002). These scholars theorize publics as discursive spaces in which strangers interact over circulating texts and through shared norms and values. Publics establish communal values (Deem 2002; Mays 2015) through which members of the public understand what texts others in the public value and thus what texts can be discussed, shared, and otherwise circulated (Chaput 2010; Jenkins et al 2013; Mays 2015). Through their communal values, publics establish what Michael Warner (2002) calls "constraints on circulation," which are communal norms for interaction and circulation, like mandated genres, discursive styles, and other shared cultural forms (90-92). These shared norms and values contain discursive constraints that regulate how individuals interact within publics, and specific to circulation, frame how individuals evaluate, share, and use texts (Chaput 2010; Deem 2002; Mays 2015). Individuals observe and then use these norms to direct how they interact with other members of the public, how they apply localized knowledges, and how they understand what they can circulate and how they can circulate it. These norms become a key element in how individuals constitute themselves as public subjects.

Norms are multifaceted and nebulous. They are spread across nearly all elements of the public: its spaces, genres, delivery systems, and rhetorics. They establish parameters for engaging with texts and other members of the public within the spaces of the public. They are rules for interactions between individuals and texts and between individuals and other members of the same public in relation to texts. They engender potential responses to texts and discourses, provide

mechanisms for valuing texts, and establish genres and stylistic conventions. However, norms are *not* prescriptive; they are guidelines individuals adopt to participate within publics.

Thus, norms make it difficult, if not impossible, for members of local publics to grasp how or why to circulate a text that falls outside of the public's norms. As Karina Nahon and Jeff Hemsley (2013) summarized the issue in their book on social media circulation, *Going Viral*: "for something to [circulate], it must not only get our attention in the first place, but it must overcome our resistance to sharing it" (61). Members of publics become conditioned to engage with particular sets of texts, rhetorics, and information that circulate through defined channels. Thus, members of a public will struggle to engage with discourses or information that do not conform to the public's norms. Norms shape how members of publics engage with texts, delimiting what circulation will most likely happen as well as creating the foundations for blockages, distortions, and/or indifference toward activist texts. For example, TWF perceived the local norms for socioeconomic discourses to be warped by neoliberal and patriarchal rhetorics that framed the local economy as a meritocratic, apolitical, "already-fair," free market, and therefore many Cincinnatians had no value to attach to or understanding of how and why to circulate TWF's messages on the structural challenges that women encountered in the local economy.

While norms might be too multifaceted and nebulous to be excised from a public, practitioners can use the multifaceted and nebulous nature of norms to their advantage. As I will outline, TWF demonstrates that practitioners can first study and understand local norms. Using that understanding, practitioners can work to incorporate into local norms new literacies, new ways of engaging with texts, and new value systems. TWF sought to provide individuals within their local publics alternative means for accessing and engaging their research and messages on women's socioeconomic issues. So, the #Smarticle strategy endeavored to construct new possibilities and values for circulation. They contested the local norms about social and economic issues while also creating value for information and discourse on women's socioeconomic issues within those contest norms.



With this concept of norms—public-sanctioned, nebulous frameworks that regulate how members of a public value texts, participate in discourses, and circulate information—established, I now turn to my case study of TWF’s #Smarticle strategy, which worked to contest the local norms for discussing socioeconomic issues of women.

## **#SMARTICLES CASE STUDY: TWF’S STRATEGY FOR ENGAGING LOCAL PUBLIC NORMS**

While the #Smarticle strategy ran for more than a year, from February 2015 to May 2016, TWF started developing the strategy several years earlier when the various writers at TWF began observing how others reacted to texts and research on women’s issues. Only after years of observing interactions between individuals and TWF’s texts in local publics did they develop the #Smarticle strategy. I present a case study of the strategy and its gradual development and implementation below. I have structured the case study to focus on each phase of the strategy and its attendant implications for circulation. I start with TWF’s efforts to identify and then situate their work in response to local norms before launching #Smarticles. From there, I examine the three key elements of the strategy: contesting local norms, storing and scheduling the recirculation of others’ texts, and valuing qualitative results over quantitative.

### *Observing Local Norms*

Prior to adopting the organizational mission of “reaching backyards and board rooms” with their texts, TWF spent nearly a decade working on a range of women’s issues. During this time, they would adapt their messages and texts—everything from research reports to press releases to public events—not only to suit their organizational efforts to help local women but also to work within their perceived resistance to their work. Over time, they recognized that their messages, and other discourses on women’s socioeconomic issues, were being blocked, resisted, and ignored. As Cummings explained, TWF has always been concerned with how their local publics engage with their work: “We are really aware of the public space we work in. We are talking about issues that are probably seen as liberal issues in a place that is really conservative.” So, they took the time to observe, identify, and then define the norms in their local publics; they wanted

to understand both what discourses people circulated in local public spaces and the boundaries of what people could engage with in those spaces. For several years, TWF's writers observed a consistent set of reactions to their work: resistance, indifference, and distortions. Through these observations, TWF recognized the impact of these norms on their work and thus extended their organizational work to contest those norms.

TWF's efforts to observe and define their local norms began prior to many of the writers' involvement with the organization. Freytag first engaged with the norms at her position prior to becoming involved with TWF. In the early 2000s, Freytag ran a Cincinnati-based marketing firm specializing in marketing for women, and so she desired an understanding of how local publics engaged with discourses on women and women's issues. Freytag thus found ways to quantify publics' engagement with women. In particular, she sought quantifiable data that could broadly articulate her local public's lack of engagement with women's issues.

Freytag decided that one way to get data on how local publics engaged with women would be to quantify how much the local media covered women. To get this information, Freytag went to the public library and pulled the issues of *The Cincinnati Enquirer* and *Cincinnati Business Courier* that had been published in the previous six months. Using a ruler, she measured each issue for print space dedicated to professional women, be it a deliberate focus on a woman, such as a profile of a female business leader, or more general reportage, such as a quote from a woman. For the sake of comparison, Freytag also measured every inch that covered professionals in general. Freytag discovered that, "For every mile of print coverage in Cincinnati (about professionals), less than 400 feet was about professional women."

Shortly thereafter, Freytag became TWF's executive director, bringing with her this perspective on the limited coverage women received in the local media. When it came to circulating TWF's work, Freytag understood that the local media's poor coverage of women engendered narrow public norms for circulating texts, particularly when it came to economic and social issues. As Freytag summarized it, "You just couldn't talk about [socioeconomic issues] from the

perspective of women. You had to talk about [socioeconomic issues] from a more general, business perspective.” As her research demonstrated, no convention existed for how to cover or engage texts on women and/or women’s issues when it came to economic concerns. Members of local publics lacked consistent exposure to texts on women and women’s issues. They lacked the norms to find value in economic texts that focus on women. They also lacked experience with others circulating texts on these issues, so they lacked the literacies to know how, where, and to whom to circulate texts on women’s economic issues.

Building upon Freytag’s research, TWF recognized that the limited media coverage of women influenced public perceptions of what constituted “women’s issues.” Through encounters with individuals new to TWF or their work, Neidhard gradually recognized that people had a conception of “women’s issues” that had nothing to do with the social and economic inequalities that women grappled with; instead, many defined “women’s issues” as health issues, like breast cancer and pregnancy. According to Neidhard:

If we were playing *Family Feud*, and you polled a group of Cincinnatians [about what they thought “women’s issues” were], I don’t think that poverty or economic self-sufficiency would be an answer. They would probably say something like “breast cancer.”

Locally, the perceptions of and values for TWF’s work were incredibly narrow, reducing the complex social, economic, and cultural challenges women face to a small set of health-related concerns. TWF faced a restricted set of norms for public interaction with their texts and information.

TWF also recognized that when it came to the socioeconomic issues TWF addressed, the largest issue was the neoliberal logics that underpinned many of the norms and values in local Cincinnati publics. As Freytag explained, TWF’s work on the issues around women and poverty, jobs, single motherhood, and economic inequality was often met with calls for meritocracy, that is, serving everybody equally. Furthermore, the local publics valued texts and discourses that operated through rhetorics of the self-legitimizing logics of

middle-class meritocracy, that individual success, which is measured by wealth and status, arise entirely through one's own efforts (Scott 2016; Trimbur 1991; Wingard 2013). These rhetorics established rigid binaries for addressing and engaging with information and messages on social and economic issues. For TWF, these logics manifested most commonly in the reactions to texts on women's socioeconomic issues. As Neidhard recounted, the usual response to any discourses about women's socioeconomic issues, including research on pay inequality or the challenges single mothers face, were obstructed by these binaries, with the general reaction being that "If you are in a bad situation and an adult, the public reaction is, 'Why can't you just pull up your bootstraps and work harder?'" Neidhard's deliberate use of the term "bootstraps" is revealing, referencing one of the common tropes of neoliberal rhetorics: in a meritocratic economy, everyone works only for themselves and thus, when faced with difficulties, individuals' only recourse is to pull themselves up by their proverbial bootstraps.

More specifically, TWF's perceptions of the influence of neoliberal logics in their local publics arose out of a popular and influential economic report, a report that played a central role in TWF's shift into their "reaching backyards and board room" organizational mission. In 2013, a consortium of Cincinnati nonprofits, universities, and the local city council commissioned a report about the future of Cincinnati's economy. The report, titled the "2020 Jobs Outlook," endeavored to define the Cincinnati economy for the 2010-2020 decade. The report studied local industries and broader economy trends in an effort to define what the local economy would look like for businesses and workers.

The "2020 Jobs Outlook" report centered on a dozen professional fields that the research suggested would see job growth in the coming decade. Building upon that data, the report identified average salaries in those fields and the required education levels to obtain jobs in those fields. Through these findings, the report concluded that the Cincinnati economy would grow around a few industries: healthcare, technology, banking, and education. The report then suggested that financial and education resources be directed to training and preparation for those fields. While well-intentioned, the report

defined the Cincinnati economy through traditional neoliberal logics: an apolitical marketplace where the only barriers to employment were one's own effort toward getting the requested training for high-paying jobs (Scott 2016; Trimbur 1991; Wingard 2013). Within weeks of its release, the report became highly influential; its infographics and statistics about job growth and the economy became a key part of the local discourse around socioeconomic issues.

For TWF, the report highlighted the ways local discourses on socioeconomic issues were constrained to a narrow set of neoliberal logics that prioritized the mythical and apolitical free market. Freytag and Cummings recounted being shocked when they first read the report in late 2013. They immediately recognized that the report reduced the local economy to a series of competitive opportunities, failing to acknowledge the ways gender, race, and class shape access and support to opportunities and places of employment. Freytag recounted her first experiences reading the report:

I looked at [an infographic about the growing job categories in Cincinnati] and because the jobs were lined up on a salary scale, I just had this flash in my head of saying, "Oh my gosh! All these jobs at the bottom, that's where the women are." And this was the umpteenth time that an economic report had been issued in town by somebody and they hadn't pulled it apart by gender.

The report was yet another example in a long series of texts on socioeconomic issues in the Greater Cincinnati area being flattened to the neoliberal logics. There was little acknowledgment of the role of gender, race, and class in structuring the local economy and the opportunities it offered. In reading the report and witnessing its rapid circulation, TWF recognized that the norms for circulating texts and information on socioeconomic issues in Cincinnati were shaped around apolitical, neoliberal rhetorics that had flattened out any considerations for gender, race, and/or class, leaving simplistic, binary ways of thinking about jobs, the local economy, and/or the characteristics of the local workforce.

The initial development phase of the #Smartricle strategy reveals the need for circulation strategies to fixate on the idiosyncratic

discursive and material infrastructures of local publics, an expansion both to how we approach circulation strategies as practitioners, and to how we research circulation strategies. After years of observing reactions to their work, analyzing the local media, and studying the research and discourses that circulated in their local publics, TWF realized that their local publics were shaped by norms rooted in conservative, patriarchal, neoliberal logics that valued meritocratic and neutral (genderless, raceless, and classless) rhetorics on jobs, economic growth, and the character of the workforce. TWF had to contest these norms so that their work could reach backyards and board rooms. TWF demonstrated that practitioners need to observe local norms and other discursive infrastructures. Only with an understanding of local discursive infrastructures can they develop texts and messages that can circulate within those norms, or, as TWF did, they can develop strategies that challenge those norms. In sum, circulation strategies for activist texts should arise out of observations of local norms, rooting all elements of the strategy in considerations of those norms, which is precisely what TWF did in early 2015 when they finally decided to develop a circulation strategy that disputed local norms.

### *Engaging Local Norms*

In January 2015, TWF held an organizational retreat, during which they deliberated various strategies for challenging the norms that structured their local publics. They brainstormed a range of strategies—everything from creating a short, “designed-to-go-viral” documentary about women’s local issues to identifying and motivating Cincinnatians who had high numbers of followers on Twitter to tweet about TWF. During the brainstorming, Freytag contemplated when, if ever, people in Cincinnati had circulated texts on women’s socioeconomic issues. She thought that if she could identify some group that already circulated texts on women’s socio-economic issues, she could enhance, promote, and/or expand that circulation. Suddenly, she realized that there was a group regularly circulating texts on women’s socioeconomic issues: TWF. As Freytag explained:

[Members of TWF staff] and I had been looking at and sharing books and articles [on women’s socioeconomic issues]. We would share these with one another, saying things like, ‘Here’s

this interesting chapter about women in poverty.’ And the idea crystalized that, couldn’t we put up articles that would get others doing the same thing, certainly our existing [social media] followers but also it might get their friends to go, “oh, I see women’s challenges now.”

The group latched onto Freytag’s idea and shifted their brainstorming to how they could turn their internal, organizational circulation into a broad, public strategy.

Acknowledging their internal constraints (financial, material, and individual), they decided to continue circulating articles and reports that could already be found online. They would use these texts to challenge the norms that traditionally blocked their texts, revealing that Cincinnatians could have productive public conversations about socioeconomic issues centered on the structural challenges women face. They recognized the power of the texts they circulated to start conversations and motivate further circulation. As Freytag explained of the aim of the strategy, “We thought, ‘How can we get the cool articles that we see, read, and hear about out into the public and potentially use [the articles] to start a dialogue?’” The strategy would recirculate these texts into public spaces where they could present new discursive opportunities and contest established norms. Recognizing that social media had become a crucial public space, they focused their strategy on social media platforms. So, they decided to post articles and research reports about women’s socioeconomic issues that members of the TWF found, on a near weekly basis.

Recognizing that distributing and circulating texts, even digital ones, can be costly and time-consuming, TWF focused their strategy on Facebook, which offered a common, crucial, and easily-accessible “delivery system.” Paula Mathieu and Diana George (2009) explain that “delivery systems” are the material and social infrastructures for distributing texts into publics, such as the network of writers, editors, printers, and street-vendors that distributed newspapers written by the homeless. Facebook has provided access to their own material infrastructures, provided individuals have access to the internet and have computer literacies. Obviously, the Facebook “delivery systems” feed right into Facebook’s public space, and, more

importantly, Facebook feeds had become a “delivery system” that the average individual checked multiple times a day. Thus, Facebook offered TWF and their limited means a “delivery system” they could easily and cheaply access and that circulated texts directly into the public spaces they sought to engage.

Facebook thus offered both an accessible “delivery system” and a popular public space. TWF knew that it was the social media platform most familiar to their target audience of civically engaged Cincinnatians, ranging in age from early-30s to early-60s. As Zeynep Tufekci (2017) addressed in *Twitter and Tear Gas*, Facebook has become a crucial public space, where individuals participate in public discourses and actions (see: circulating texts or discussing circulating texts) amidst family, friends, casual acquaintances, and strangers (19-21). Thus, Facebook offered TWF the ideal platform for reaching both private and social public spaces, like backyards, and more professional public spaces, like board rooms. By treating Facebook as a public space, TWF could inject texts on women’s socioeconomic issues into public spaces, and through consistent posting of texts, they could establish a value for their texts in those spaces.

As a strategy, #Smarticles involved the scheduled posting of recent news articles about social and/or economic issues that addressed the distinct challenges women faced. Shortly before TWF started the #Smarticle strategy, Facebook redesigned its feed so that when users posted links to articles, Facebook reformatted the links so that the individual posts displayed the cover image and title of the article underneath the post. See Figure 1 on the next page as an example.

In addition to the article and the images and title Facebook embedded, TWF added their own commentary to the post. Usually, TWF posted short summaries of the articles that articulated the connections between the article’s information and/or message and local socioeconomic issues. Sometimes TWF connected the articles to their own research, other times to current issues or events, such as local public discussion about daycare or Mother’s Day. They also frequently posted quotes from the articles and, on occasion, questions that asked public audiences to make connections between





Figure 1: Two #Smarticles as they appeared on The Women's Fund of The Greater Cincinnati Foundation Facebook page

the information and public discourses in Cincinnati. For example, on September 22, 2015, TWF posted:

Our #Smarticle today reminds us that there are some realities best demonstrated through visuals. Search “CEO” on Google images and the first woman to appear after dozens of men is likely plastic. Barbie trumps even Yahoo’s Marissa Mayer on the Internet’s symbolic ranking of female success (The Women’s Fund of The Greater Cincinnati 2015).

The posting of the article, embedded both an image of a Google search that reveals only white, older males and the title of a *Washington Post* article, “The Uncomfortable Truth About How We View Working Women, in one Simple Google Search.” With this post, and dozens of others like it, TWF worked with Facebook’s reformatting of articles and hyperlinks to generate conversation threads that drew upon the social media platform’s affordances and constraints so as to circulate texts on women’s socioeconomic issues. With this particular post, they also engaged with local discourses about business, neoliberal rhetorics, and the unstated norm of focusing on men. They entered

into a popular public space, Facebook, and performed a common public literacy. They posted articles with one's own commentary, and even interfaced with the dominant norms regulating that space and literacy, yet they inserted activist information and messages about the structural challenges women face into this common rhetoric. They challenged what could circulate into that public space and demonstrated that public literacies could be used to engage with activist texts.

TWF, though, did not limit themselves only to gender issues. On February 22, 2016, they posted a report from the U.S. Department of Labor that outlined many unnerving statistics about the economic issues black women face. To accompany the report, titled "Black Women in the Labor Force," TWF wrote a short and direct comment that tied the report and women's socioeconomic issues to then-ongoing Black History month, valuing the report as its own distinct contribution to discussions about socioeconomic issues (see Figure 2 below).



Figure 2: TWF #Smarticle post made on February 22, 2016 to The Women's Fund of The Greater Cincinnati Foundation Facebook page

The post pointed toward and valued others' research on women's socioeconomic issues. It also established that there were other perspectives beyond their own gendered "lens" on these issues—that issues such as race also factored into socioeconomic challenges faced by women. Again, TWF injected into the public space an alternative value set and activist information that pushed against the norms regulating discourse in that space.

#Smarticles contested local public norms in three ways. First off, they opened a local public space, Facebook feeds, (Nahon and Hemsley 2013; Ryder 2010; Sheridan et al 2012; Tufekci 2017) to activist texts. Generally, the strategy pushed more articles on women's socioeconomic issues into the public space, thus providing more possibilities for individuals to experience texts and information about women's socioeconomic issues circulating in those spaces. They sought to expand what individuals expected to see in that space. Building upon this increased awareness that an existing space for public circulation could support the circulation of a particular type of activist text, the strategy attempted to encourage others to circulate texts through the practices the strategy itself enacted.

Second, #Smarticles enacted a set of specific practices that TWF hoped to encourage in their local publics. They wrote #Smarticle posts through an approachable and informal writing style, far more conversational than "professional" or "public." This enacted the common social media writing style (Dadas and Jory 2015; Nahon and Hemsley 2013; Ryder 2010). It also established a more conversational approach to talking about socioeconomic issues in general, encouraging individuals to discuss such issues in more personal, social settings. In the posts, TWF also quoted and cited statistics and comments from articles, circulation practices they aimed to encourage in others. Lastly, TWF wrote summaries that connected the articles to larger local issues and ongoing conversations. TWF wanted to show how others could discuss, and thus circulate, research and texts on women's socioeconomic issues. They could connect articles on women in poverty to Mother's Day or the gendered implications of daycare to the emerging local conversations about publicly funded daycare. As Neidhard explained, "The aim of the strategy was to get people to talk about these issues in backyards

and boardrooms. We wanted people to be able to use these articles as something they could talk about later.” #Smarticles enacted the circulation practices that TWF hoped to motivate others to perform. The strategy demonstrated that the circulation practices of citing, quoting, summarizing, and connecting to current discourses could be applied to texts and information on women’s socioeconomic issues.

Third, TWF recirculated others’ texts in an effort to reframe the existing norms and to advocate that a conversation about women’s socioeconomic issues was happening. Through sheer repetition and through the range of articles that they posted, they established a value for research and discourses on women’s socioeconomic issues, or, at the very least, suggest there could be a value for such work. Doing so required circulating a range of texts that covered a range of concerns and that also fit to the genres and styles that others could immediately connect with the already-circulating texts and discourses on socioeconomic issues. As Lester C. Olson (2009) outlined in “Pictorial Representations of British Americans Resisting Rape,” acts of recirculation involve a specific rhetorical act involving a remarkably similar body of texts, “patterned deliberately after an earlier, almost identical [text]” (3). TWF recirculated feminist socioeconomic texts that were identical, in terms of genre and style, to the genderless, neoliberal, and patriarchal socioeconomic research and discourses that already circulated. They even recirculated texts that didn’t directly engage with women’s issues but, through their writing on the posts themselves, reframed the texts as explicitly dealing with women’s socioeconomic issues. As Neidhard explained, “Sometimes the articles we posted weren’t intentionally putting a gender lens on an issue. Or sometimes the story the article was trying to tell wasn’t about women in poverty. For those kinds of articles, the fact that we could re-share it and put that new light on it was important.” TWF recirculated others’ articles to reframe the existing norms, establishing an alternative value system and a “new light” on these issues.

### *Storing and Recirculating Others’ Texts*

TWF recognized that rewiring local norms and encouraging new rhetorical actions tied to their work required more than a handful of posts: it required a consistent and credible stream of articles

and report. Their experiences with distributing and presenting their research taught them that any initial efforts would likely be met with indifference and/or resistance. Thus, they felt they needed to be consistent by circulating texts regularly. They also knew that given the high-likelihood of initial resistance, they needed to present credible information from reputable news sources and researchers. They needed to both overcome and overwhelm initial resistance through a constant stream of texts and information. Furthermore, a consistent stream of articles and research from a range of sources could establish both the existence of public discourse on women's issues (Chaput 2010; Edbauer 2005) as well as a rising exigency for addressing these issues (Ryder 2010). Through such an effort they could reframe and establish new values within the established norms for socioeconomic issues. So, they developed a plan for storing and scheduling the distribution of articles and research reports.

Following the 2015 organizational retreat, they dispersed the work of collecting the articles across the organization. TWF wanted a range of articles that could crop up in the daily lives of Cincinnatians. So, they needed multiple members to collect articles that appeared in their daily lives. As Neidhard explained, "[Articles on women's socioeconomic issues] are actually all over the place. And different people went about finding them in different ways. A lot of the time, I would just be doing my regular news-reading and I would find something relevant." Given that they wanted to demonstrate an ongoing public discourse and an alternative set of values, or at least that texts on women's socioeconomic issues could work within existing values, they needed a diverse range of texts.

TWF sought to have enough articles to have a weekly #Smarticle post. So, they had all members of the organization collect at least six articles. Each member then posted a link to their articles to an organizationally shared Google Doc, which became a "database." They also contributed a short summary of each article. Most articles were collected in the weeks immediately after the retreat and leading up to the start of the strategy in February 2015. However, they continued the process beyond that initial period. Relevant articles and research reports would continue to appear after the start of the strategy. So, members were encouraged to continue adding

articles once the strategy started, and many did. About this process, Cummings recalled, “I would often come across articles just going through my day, and then I would post them into the Google Doc. The articles are out there if you are looking for them.” Through their combined efforts, TWF created a database of articles on women’s socioeconomic issues they drew from to post #Smarticles consistently and, when possible, kairotically.

Hoping to establish a consistency to the stream of articles and research reports, TWF established a schedule for article posting. On posting days, one TWF member would consider the recent public discourses on socioeconomic issues, such as economic growth or employment numbers, and then find an article in the database relevant to the discourse. They posted articles that related research on women’s socioeconomic issues to the exigencies of those days, connecting their work and general concerns for women’s socioeconomic challenges with the local public discourses about such issues. Generally, they posted articles every Tuesday. However, they also modified their schedule to post articles on relevant holidays, like Labor Day and Mother’s Day. For example, they posted an article on Mother’s Day 2015 about the ways Mother’s Day feels isolating for single, working mothers in comparison to the national narratives celebrating mothers and motherhood.

In recent scholarship on circulation strategies, scholars have addressed the need for prolonged strategies (Mathieu and George 2009; Mathieu et al 2012; Rude 2004) and for activating existing circulation or already-distributed texts (Olson 2009; Ridolfo and DeVoss 2009; Tufekci 2017). TWF reaffirmed these strategies while also suggesting new approaches. The strategy suggests that texts and information can be stored for later redistribution, be it for the sake of presenting a consistent stream of texts or for kairotic reactivation (Ridolfo and DeVoss 2009). They also show that such a plan can be scheduled over time, that circulation strategies can be planned for more than single distributions or around single discourses, and that such strategies can be extended across months and even years. The strategy also demonstrates that extended circulation strategies can and likely should be collective efforts. Multiple practitioners can and should work together to establish the internal infrastructures for

circulation strategies. Similarly, the strategy demonstrates the ways practitioners can work with *others'* texts and information, amplifying and signal-boosting others' work as well as using the diversity and range of others' data and messages about particular issues to demonstrate larger values for and discourses around specific, local issues. As others have argued, the #Smarticle strategy reveals that public circulation often requires prolonged and collective efforts.

*Valuing the Qualitative Versus the Quantitative with Circulation*

Despite centering on a social media platform, the #Smarticle strategy reveals another way to evaluate and value circulation beyond the metrics and algorithms provided by social media platforms—the numbers of retweets, likes, and views that the platforms invite practitioners to value (Jenkins et al 2013; Nahon and Hemsley 2013; Tufekci 2017). It would have been easy for TWF to rely on those metrics: a high number of likes or comments would have been an obvious demonstration of individuals being able to see beyond restrictive local public norms and engage with their work. Yet, TWF focused on outcomes beyond the quantitative outcomes that social media as a public space overemphasizes.

Reflecting back on the strategy, both Cummings and Freytag valued qualitative outcomes over the quantitative metrics of the social media platform. Cummings directly criticized relying on social media metrics, explaining, “For me, I think, ‘So what if we are trending?’ If something isn’t getting more people to be involved with us or give to us or even just talking about us, I don’t see the value.” Cummings felt that a high number of likes on posts using their hashtag was ultimately meaningless for their goals of getting their texts into backyards and board rooms. The #Smarticle strategy strove to make future circulation possible in social and professional settings; it did not exist to circulate on its own and make TWF briefly popular on social media platforms.

As the executive director of TWF during the strategy, Freytag experienced the effects of the #Smarticle strategy slightly differently. Freytag acknowledged that the #Smarticles never did “great” in terms of Facebook’s metrics—the most likes a post generated was seventeen. Yet Freytag, much like Cummings, did

not care about such metrics. For Freytag, the #Smarticles had far greater impact beyond Facebook in the social interactions the posts generated. Freytag recounted that once the #Smarticle strategy had started, she regularly had experiences in which she met people in the Greater Cincinnati area who talked to her and others about the most recently posted #Smarticle. She estimated that in the year that the #Smarticle strategy ran, she had nearly fifty social encounters about recently posted #Smarticles. She also received dozens of emails from acquaintances and strangers about the #Smarticles. People wanted to talk about the articles and, more significantly, about the issues they engaged. Freytag sensed that the #Smarticles generated interpersonal circulation. Freytag summarized these experiences, saying, “People started to pick up on [women’s socioeconomic issues]. I got emails and in-person comments from people saying, ‘Hey, I learned from that #Smarticle,’ or ‘hey, that’s a great point,’ or ‘hey, I needed to hear that.’” She experienced a shift in the Greater Cincinnati area, of more people, particularly strangers to the organization, discussing women’s socioeconomic issues because of their interactions with #Smarticles. Success for TWF was not 2,000 “retweets,” but twenty strangers discussing women’s socioeconomic issues for the first time.

TWF’s concerns were never for the #Smarticle posts themselves. TWF wanted to engage with the discursive structures that shaped how individuals in Cincinnati-area publics reacted to their texts. After recognizing that their local publics conditioned individuals to engage with their texts in hostile ways, TWF aimed to *help* those strangers engage with their work. Through the #Smarticle strategy, TWF installed new possibilities for circulating research and information on women’s socioeconomic issues into local backyards and board rooms. They knew that the path to those discursive spaces went first through their local publics norms, which they worked to rewire, and then through individuals who had often never heard of TWF before, strangers whom they hoped gradually would expose to their work through the circulation of various kinds of texts. If we embrace and follow TWF’s suggestion to contest the material and/or social infrastructures in our local publics, then we need to embrace messy, evolving, and petite outcomes for our strategies.



## **CONCLUSION: CHANGING PUBLIC CONVERSATIONS**

Through their #Smarticle strategy, TWF has demonstrated that as we continue to research and enact strategies for generating circulation, we need to incorporate considerations for our local publics. As some have already suggested, the infrastructures of the publics we engage will shape the conditions for circulation (Chaput 2010; Edbauer 2005; Mathieu et al 2012; Warner 2002; Wells 1996). Each public is its own idiosyncratic discursive space with diverse norms, values, and material infrastructures that will regulate the circulation of texts. As TWF's experiences prior to the #Smarticle strategy demonstrate, local infrastructures and norms can confound, stymie, and block even the best circulation strategies. Thus, we need to expand how we research and enact circulation strategies to encourage and enable practitioners to study and engage those norms, values, and infrastructures.

For their strategy, TWF targeted the discursive structures of Cincinnati publics, engaging the norms that regulate the ways individuals discuss, share, and circulate texts in public spaces. And through their #Smarticle strategy, TWF demonstrated four distinct approaches for strategizing circulation that other practitioners can adopt:

- Practitioners should observe and define the norms in their local public, identifying characteristics to situate their work within and against.
- Circulation strategies do not have to rely on the production of new texts or discourses; practitioners can also compile and consistently recirculate others' texts to establish alternative public norms, values, and discourses.
- Practitioners should set qualitative goals of circulation strategies, such as network building and equipping strangers to circulate texts they couldn't have prior.
- Circulation strategies are not only singular actions, they can also be emergent processes that require time and the involvement of multiple individuals.

In sum, when we aim to generate circulation for activist texts, the strategies we employ must engage with the discursive structures that

regulate local publics. However, TWF established that when we do this, we must hone our vision, focusing on the strangers within our local publics, the individuals grappling with the public's discursive and material infrastructures in public spaces. As we endeavor to circulate critical discourses, we must find ways to enable and empower those strangers to envision other possibilities for engagement with social issues. We must enable them to comprehend and participate in the circulation of texts and discourses that are relevant to our publics yet camouflaged by dominant social norms. TWF considered the #Smarticle strategy a success only once they observed others being able to understand, share, and discuss research on women's socioeconomic issues. Much like TWF, only when we can motivate strangers to overcome their own conditioned resistances and engage with our texts can we influence our local public discourses.

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